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DECORATING

The power and the glory

Some people are moved by faith to mix religious art or objects in their home décor. For others, beauty and craftsmanship make their own kind of spiritual experience.

By Janet Eastman
Times Staff Writer

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DAVID-MICHAEL Madigan is not a religious man. Yet he has placed something sacred in each room of his North Santa Ana home. There is a 14th century holy water font in the entry, an aged oak prayer kneeler in a bedroom. Mixed among the Art Deco in the living room are a Gothic-style pulpit, a centuries-old painting of Buddha by a Tibetan monk, Chinese grave figurines thought to protect in the afterlife and heirloom menorahs.

"They represent warmth, heritage, dignity," says Madigan, "attributes I want in my home."

Spiritual artwork has been in dwellings since early man drew on cave walls, but today, with a majority of surveyed Americans telling a recent poll by the Gallup organization that they consider themselves religious or spiritual, devotional merchandise — from coffee-table books to corner altars — is a \$65-billion-a-year business, according to Brandweek magazine. Book and antique stores as well as websites sell everything needed to stock a small private chapel or temple. And fine religious artifacts, once available at flea markets, are going to the highest bidder at auction houses.

"Americans are engaged in a passionate, nostalgic search to make their living spaces feel more like the homes and places they knew as children," says Marlee Ledai, a Redding-based author of religious books including "Living Spaces: Bringing Style and Spirit to Your Home." "Most of us know the traditional look of a place of worship, and it's calming."

Ledai has seen church pews used as seating around kitchen tables and scrolled cemetery gates dressing up gardens. "These objects were created with reverence by craftsmen," she says. "They hold history, legacy, affection and beauty."

Until World War II, most of the estates and mansions built during the 1920s and 1930s in Madigan's North Santa Ana neighborhood had a place of worship. In the postwar haste to build smaller, however, few houses were blueprinted with a spiritual room. Then in the 1960s, when religious groups loosened restrictions and removed many ornate furniture pieces to create a more welcoming ambience at places of worship, followers did the same in their homes. Other than a cross, mezuzah or simple devotional symbol, large religious pieces were generally put away.

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But today, corners of devotion are taking back their place of prominence. Wal-Mart sells candles with imprinted images of the Madonna and Jesus. Websites such as <http://www.religiousmall.com> sell hanging vigil oil candles and bottles of Holy Communion wine. Ann Sacks Tile & Stone offers pieces of limestone that were pulled from paths in Jerusalem. "Jesus may have walked on this," says a saleswoman at the Laguna Niguel showroom, holding a thick, rough-chiseled block.

Ledai says places of worship have always been seen as refuges, and people want that same feeling for their homes. "It should be a place to lay our head down and rest and not worry about intrusions from the outside," she says. "These [objects] lend grace to our homes."

But others are drawn to the aesthetics rather than the spiritual. Los Angeles antiques dealer Richard Shapiro says that although some collectors of religious paintings, sculptures and other artifacts are genuinely drawn to what the pieces represent, others focus only on their art and beauty. In his showroom, Shapiro has sold Christian, Jewish and other religious pieces to people of all faiths and those with no spiritual beliefs.

Artists Roy Dowell and Lari Pittman are atheists, yet their La Crescenta home and nearby studio are brimming with colorful Mexican *retablos*, images of Roman Catholic saints painted on tin, zinc, wood or copper, and *ex votos*, drawings and words on canvas or tin thanking a saint for a miracle.

"We are not collecting with any sense of irony or superiority. We have tremendous respect that these mean something to someone," says Dowell, who also collects tablets with passages from the Koran and other religion-based objects. "But when I'm looking at a *santos*, I'm not looking at it as a depiction of a saint but at its sense of invention and its patina, and how the person who carved it manipulated the wood."

When Dowell and Pittman began collecting *retablos* two decades ago, they could buy them for \$10 to \$100 each. Now, says Dowell, more people have been exposed to Mexican folk art through exhibitions and books on artists such as Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. The paintings now cost a few hundred to a few thousand dollars, Dowell says, depending on the quality, patina, invention, technical aspects and rarity. Concerned about unintentionally acquiring objects that have been stolen from churches and homes, he adds to his 100-piece collection by working with reputable dealers, including Jim Caswell of Historia in Santa Monica.

Even when religious artwork is taken out of its devotional context, "a powerful symbology remains, communicating something about the beliefs, identity and even the times of the people for whom it was created," says Tod M. Tamberg, a spokesman for the Los Angeles Archdiocese.

He has an oak pew from the old St. Vibiana's Cathedral in the dining room of his home. In the entry is a high-backed chair made from a choir pew. "They are great conversation pieces and are actually pretty comfortable," he says. He cautions, however, about displaying the pieces with "proper reverence" and respect.

"Not all religious items are of equal standing," says Tamberg. "A chalice carries much more symbolic meaning than, say, a church pulpit or pew. A chalice is the vessel that holds the

consecrated wine, the blood of Christ. It would never be all right to use a chalice as a beer stein."

For Madigan, the pieces that he has collected are reminders of his childhood in Long Beach and Colorado Springs, Colo. "Weekends were leisure time, [and] going to church was part of that leisurely weekend," says Madigan, 36, an interior designer who was raised Catholic but is no longer practicing. "When I look at these pieces, I feel safe, centered, comforted."

His Christian, Jewish and Asian religious artifacts mix with antiques, a Colonial-style fireplace and Art Deco lighting in his 1936 Federal Colonial Revival house. A Gothic-style oak pulpit is near the sofa. Nearby are an oak priest chair, a French floor candelabra, one of two used to light an altar 200 years ago, and a pair of small lanterns with crackled amber glass that once lighted a tabernacle. Sitting atop a round Biedermeier-style table is an Art Deco crucifix along with a collection of early bronze sculptures. His family's Bibles and a black miniature model of a casket with an engraved plaque that reads, "Here Lies," rest on a Gothic chest with intricate tracery.

"The tiny fake casket is kind of morbid, but I like it," he says.

He found the Carrara marble holy-water font for his entry last year during a trip to Italy. The salesperson at the antique store told him it came from a 14th century church. Mortar from the church wall still clings to its side. The font sits atop a 1930s demi-lune wall console, along with an original watercolor of a piazza in Rome and an Arts and Crafts earthenware vase. Mounted above it on the wall is an early 1900s French art nouveau nude bronze wall lamp on a mahogany base.

Madigan found most of the collection in antique stores in the U.S. and Europe over the last three decades. He was told the pieces came from churches that were destroyed during war or, as in the case of the pulpit, from a church in Fullerton that was remodeled.

When designing homes for his interior-design clients, Madigan says he only suggests spiritual objects if they talk about it first. But as a historic preservationist, he often works on Spanish Colonial Revival or Mission Revival homes that have areas specifically designed to house religious articles.

"In these cases, it is my place to communicate this information to my client," says Madigan, who has designed a line of floor tiles inspired by the patinas and textures of the California missions. "What they ultimately chose to have me utilize the space for is their decision."

Neighbors Luis Pecora, 77, and Buoncuore, 74, have also filled their 1927 French Normandy two-story house with religious art. Some of their pieces date from the 11th century and earlier. Pecora points to the Madonna and Child painting in the living room, which he has traced to Hans Memling.

"We don't know if he actually puts his hands on it," says Pecora of the 15th century artist, "but it shows his grace, intellectualism and artistry."

There is also a centuries-old altar from a private chapel in an Italian palazzo, an Austrian prayer book printed in the 1800s and a hand-carved crucifix plated in gold. Pecora bought most of his pieces in the 1950s while traveling in war-ravaged Europe and again in the 1970s after the Catholic Church modified the Mass and simplified the garments. "Many of the garments were hand-sewn and magnificent," says Pecora, who hung one on a wall in the library. "I should have bought more."

Pecora says he protects his treasures the best that he can. He keeps the thick drapes closed during

the day, rarely turns on the heater and tries to keep the artwork from drying out. "The house is old and it's on the damp side," he says. When he found wormholes in one of the old frames, he had the house fumigated.

Pecora, who grew up with religious art in his home and says he has a special "devotional feeling to Madonna," developed a deeper appreciation for sacred artwork when he traveled in Europe. "There was a time when anyone with a good eye could collect fine objects at small antique stores and flea markets," he says. "For someone looking now, all I can say is, 'good luck at Christie's or Butterfields.' "

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